Paul Avis


In the heyday of the drafting of ecumenical documents – notably ARIC I (1981), the WCC ‘Lima’ document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), the Anglican-Lutheran Porvoo Common Statement (1993), the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification (1997) – scholars of many denominations summoned up sufficient courage and openness of mind to look behind the petrified shibboleths of centuries to the common ground of Scripture and the Fathers in order to recover the shared faith in a way that now united rather than divided them. There was abroad in those days an innocent excitement that corporate re-union of the churches was a matter only of time, and not a long time at that. As William Wordsworth put in a different context two centuries ago:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!–Oh! times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights,
When most intent on making of herself
A prime Enchantress—to assist the work,
Which then was going forward in her name!

Nevertheless the churches did not seize the *kairos* moment. The theological ‘famous stone that turneth all’ meagre and stale divisive custom and law ‘to gold’ never became the common currency of believers in the pew. Conflict within denominations has diverted focus and sapped energy from the common cause and provided pretexts for ecumenical nay-sayers to dismiss the whole movement as a lost cause.

Thankfully, there are those in whom the flame of the search for unity has not and will not be dimmed. Eminent among these is Paul Avis, the Anglican and ecumenical theologian. His writing is suffused with a palpable passion and excitement both for unity and for the potential of historical theology to help find a way to that goal. In this volume he presents an introduction to ‘Anglican theological method’ which eschews any narrow focus on Anglican theologians. As part of the universal Church, the reformed Church of England has never
been out of dialogue with the breadth of the life of that Church. Canterbury's theologians have engaged with Scriptures, the Fathers, and the mediaeval Church, with Wittenberg, Geneva, Zurich, Paris, Rome, Constantinople and Moscow. If an Anglican 'authority' can seem ill-defined – to those both outside and inside its communion – that may the result of the very catholicity of its frames of reference. It is a living tradition, healthily embodying what Alasdair MacIntyre has called 'continuities of conflict'.

For this reviewer, Avis's book has three invaluable strengths. First, his analysis of theologians ancient and modern is accessible, clear, balanced, eirenically and constructive. He is always sensitive to the relevance of historical theology to contemporary church issues and committed to finding common ground between denominations. Avis frees his readers from stereotypes of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Augustine and Aquinas as totemic theologians belonging only to particular traditions. He engages them with one another (exploring, for example, the links between Aquinas, Calvin and Hooker) and with us, as our contemporaries in faith, and rescues them from the distortions of their more sectarian acolytes. In addition Avis is thoroughly au fait with the relevant contemporary scholarship; indeed this book could be read as a review of recent studies in historical theology. I was grateful, for example, for an introduction to the work of the Finnish school of Luther studies.

Second, Avis beards in their own den those secularist and atheist historians who would ignore the evidence of the continuing centrality of faith and religion even among avant garde philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He boldly cuts the ground from under those who would claim Bacon, Descartes, Montaigne, Hobbes, Hume and Gibbon as unbelievers subversive of faith and theology. Often enough, secularist assumptions about the beliefs of such men arise out of scholarly ignorance of the breadth of Christian theology, for example that such an extreme Erastian and anticlericalist as Hobbes could also be a sincere believer, or out of 'the theological innocence of those ... misled by cries of “atheism” on the part of Hobbes's contemporaries when “atheism” meant pretty much anything that deviated from the writer's own theological position' (p. 181). In part because Avis himself is so resistant to reductive and simplistic analyses of these thinkers, he successfully upholds their own claims to be Christians and even identifies some (like Hobbes) as theologians without needing to claim too much about the orthodoxy or conventionality of their beliefs.

Third, and perhaps most important, Avis addresses the reluctance of many contemporary Christian writers to acknowledge the Christian dimension to the Enlightenment. He makes a crucial distinction between the philosophes – secular, anticlerical, and either deistic or atheistic – and the Christian Enlightenment that took not only Anglican but Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed